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Mark R Johnson, Creator of *Ultima Ratio Regum*

Interview

For our third special issue on religion and digital games, Online had a chat with Mark R Johnson, games studies scholar at the University of York and creator of Ultima Ratio Regum¹, an ambitious game project aiming at creating “the most culturally, religiously and socially detailed procedural world ever generated.”²

Mark, please tell us something about yourself, your academic background, religious affiliation (if any), scholarly and game design related work.

My name's Dr Mark R Johnson. I'm 26, and at the moment I'm a postdoctoral fellow in the Digital Creativity Hub at the University of York in England. My undergraduate degree was in Politics & Sociology, my doctorate in Science & Technology Studies, and right now my field of research is firmly in game studies, which – for me, at least – makes my work somewhere between philosophy, sociology, media studies, computer science, and anthropology. I've published and spoken at conferences on a pretty huge range of gaming topics, from game semiotics to interactive storytelling to Japanese arcade culture. I'm currently writing up my first monograph for Bloomsbury Academic, which is going to be applying the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze to studying games, specifically games of unpredictability, randomness, chance, luck, etc. In my spare time I make Ultima Ratio Regum, which I've now been working on for close to five years, and is the first game I've ever made (though I do have super-secret plans for two subsequent, much shorter games I intend to make in the future). I'm profoundly atheistic, but (rather like Umberto Eco) I do find some aspects, primarily the impact of religion upon world history and the visuals of religious artwork, to be quite interesting, and amazingly rich ground for procedural generation. I also think certain belief systems, such as ancient Mesoamerican beliefs and Eastern quasi-religious philosophies like Daoism, are way more intellectually stimulating than most of the beliefs that dominate the real world today, and the religions in URR are very much designed to be unusual and intriguing to the player.

1 Can be downloaded free of charge at <http://www.ultimaratioregum.co.uk/game/> (last access 15.02.2016).

2 See <http://www.ultimaratioregum.co.uk/game/info/>.

What is your history with games?

I've been playing games since I was around 2 or 3. I played a lot of early MS-DOS games on my father's laptop, including some "educational" games, though I tended to favour those that weren't explicitly pedagogic. A family friend also gave us a bunch of old home computers – a C64, a ZX, an Acorn Electron – and it was at that moment I really fell in love with the medium. We probably had upwards of a thousand games on cassette across these three platforms, and I'd say I wound up playing a good 75% of them during my childhood, though many were sufficiently obtuse that in these cases there was just no way a five-year-old, no matter how game-literate, could ever solve them. I was first struck by the incredible capacity of games to create fully-realized fictional worlds when I played 1995's *Command & Conquer*, and to a lesser extent *Perfect Dark* in 2000, and most recently, and most significantly, the freakish masterwork that is *Dark Souls* (which I now consider to be the absolute highest point of artistry that games as a medium have ever achieved). At this point I own the ZX, Electron and C64, an N64, PS1, Xbox, Xbox 360, PS4, and probably around half a dozen gaming PCs have come and gone in my life. When I was a teenager and young adult I tended to play primary strategy games and first-person shooters, reaching the world #1 rank in the multiplayer mode of one of the former and getting close to playing at a national level in the latter (in *Counter-Strike: Source*), after which I shifted into card games (playing poker professionally for a few years), and these days I mostly play roguelikes, "bullet hell" games (in which I hold a couple of world record high scores), and weird experimental art games.

What exactly is Ultima Ratio Regum?

It's somewhere between a classic roguelike (a game with procedural generation, permadeath, and high levels of complexity and challenge) and an experimental art game. The core objective is to uncover a mysterious intellectual conspiracy hidden in the world's cultures, religions, societies, artworks, and so forth, by close examination of the game's generated world and conversation with those who live within it. Currently the world that the game generates is the most socially, culturally and religiously detailed world ever procedurally generated, and I'm (finally!) adding in the game's core gameplay systems at the moment.

What is your idea or intention behind creating URR?

The intention at first was just to create a roguelike for my own amusement – I never had any idea it would become such a big project or get so much attention! After a year or so, however, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to try creating a game that took the best elements of roguelikes, combined it with the best elements of puzzle games and open-world games, add a pretty heavy dash of philosophical and literary concerns, and see what emerged. My intention on a technical level is to continue pushing what I'm calling "qualitative procedural generation" in entirely new directions, and my intention on an artistic/gameplay level is to make a very unique

game that encourages people to really think about the world, and exercise problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that the majority of games don't demand (and if they do, ordinarily once you've solved a puzzle once, you know the answer, but URR's core puzzle will be generated anew each time you play).

What is the most challenging part about creating URR?

The AI and scheduling/pathfinding systems. It's just an unspeakable nightmare. Basically, the game only spawns areas of the map it needs to, i.e. areas that the player is in, and that means lots of the world map, and many buildings, often "don't exist" until the player goes in or near them. However, there are many other important characters in the game world who need to act within these areas that might not exist yet, and follow their own schedules, and remain consistent in their behaviour no matter where the player steps and what areas of the world the player spawns by stepping into them. This has led to monstrous complexity in ensuring that the AI can behave correctly when the player might be spawning and unspawning the areas of the map they're trying to pass through! I've almost got it finished, though, which is a massive relief.

What are your future plans and long term goals for URR?

This year I'll be adding in millions of generated non-player characters who act within the world and whom the player can speak with to gain information, implementing travel systems for oceans, deserts and mountains, and redoing how the game generates its history, since right now it's not in a very usable form. In the coming year or two I will get the game to generate everything needed for the game's central mystery – books, poetry, artworks, tombs, biographies, a million other cultural artefacts – and start to seed the clues to the game's central mystery within these.

What is the role of religion in URR? How and why is it part of the game?

Religion is basically just one of a number of cultural/societal factors that the game procedurally generates. Religions can exist in one nation or many, and range from the peaceful and broadly benevolent to the violent, expansionist and proselytizing, and everything in-between. It's a part of the game since it's an integral and unavoidable part of world culture (even during the Renaissance/Scientific Revolution when the game is set), and because (as above) I soon realized how much fascinating stuff I could get the game to create with a detailed religion generation system, and how much richness I could add to the actions of in-game characters.

Within URR, you are using lots of religiously "loaded" imagery and objects (like the altar depicted on the front of this issue). Did you use any kind of source material for their depiction?

To a small extent, though for the most part I created it from scratch. For some of the altar generation system I drew upon a few real religious altars from various religions, generally more

modern ones, and in a few cases I was inspired by literary sources, particularly Lovecraft and his disciples, for the weirder gods.

Did you receive any kind of reaction from players on the religious aspects of the game?

I've had a lot of feedback from people who are just really impressed and intrigued by the variety of religions in the game. No negative feedback, but then I've tried to ensure the game's religions can never be too close to real-world religions, but are always believable and coherent and what real-world religions might have been if certain people hadn't been born, others had, some cultural beliefs had survived, others had died out, etc etc.

You are – among others – naming Umberto Eco as an inspiration for creating URR, could you elaborate? What about your other inspirations?

In a way, URR is like a procedurally-generated version of the mysteries in *The Name of the Rose*, and to a lesser extent in Foucault's *Pendulum* – that kind of very deep, obscure, literary/semiotic, semi-conspiratorial puzzle. I also think Eco in *TNotR* and also in *Baudolino* paints amazingly rich pictures of historical eras, particularly the intellectual currents of those eras, and that's something I really want to produce too. The two other major inspirations are Jorge Luis Borges, for his amazing work on labyrinths, riddles, infinity, conspiracies, and a lot of other themes that really resonate with my project, and Luther Blissett/Wu Ming, particularly their novel *Q* and, similarly, its incredibly rich portrayal of the complex relationships between religion, politics, intellectual thought, war, and so forth. "Richness" is a massive goal of URR, which is why it generates everything from the overarching ideologies of each nation, down to what their chairs and tables look like; that kind of detailed "simulation" of culture and society is really crucial to the kind of world I'm trying to make and story I'm trying to tell.

In your own words: what is a "Roguelike"? What separates them from other games/genres, and what is their status within the broader gaming community and game industry?

Like I said above, to me a roguelike needs three things – extensive procedural generation to ensure the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each playthrough, permadeath which means you cannot reload when you die and have only a single life in the game, and a high level of complexity and challenge. It's a contentious word, though, and that's just my interpretation! I think their status until recent years was always quite fringe, and generally suited very much to the most "hardcore" of players who had both the strategic and tactical ability to factor in the massive complexity of these games, and – frankly – the patience to play until they were able to achieve a victory. I also think it's very important in permadeath games to have a mindset where you always blame yourself for a loss, not the game. Many newer and less-skilled roguelike players tend to always blame the game when they die, not seeing that they could in fact have survived the situation that killed them, and so it definitely requires a certain attitude towards "self-improvement" (for lack of a better term). These

days, though, with the rise of a lot of popular new roguelikes or roguelike-likes or roguelites, such as *The Binding of Isaac*, *FTL*, *Spelunky*, *Darkest Dungeon*, etc, the genre has gained a massive new appreciation, even if people have started throwing around the word “roguelike” itself with reckless abandon. In a lot of ways, I think roguelikes speak to quite a core demographic of game players, particularly to those who are perhaps unimpressed with the directions that role-playing games more broadly have moved towards in recent decades – towards simplicity, openness, forgivingness, appealing to broader swathes of the gaming public, etc – and relish the opportunity for a game that truly pulls no punches, and thereby awards a feeling of the most incredible victory when you’re finally able to beat it. The feeling of beating a classic roguelike for the first time (for me this was *NetHack* in 2008) was unlike anything I’d felt in gaming for a long time, and I didn’t really feel it again until beating *Dark Souls* for the first time.

What – if any – is the relation between the roguelike genre and religion or religious elements? Both with regards to URR and roguelikes in general?

A lot of roguelikes contain religious elements, most often in the form of unusual gods you can worship and who lend the player character particular powers in exchange for loyal behaviour. A holy crusading god wants you to kill undead; a god of ice forbids you from using fire attacks; a demonic god wants you to cause destruction; and so forth. *URR* doesn’t have this, since *URR* is filled with religious beliefs but no actual gods to be seen anywhere, which is quite unusual for a “classic” roguelike. In many ways this classic model of deities harks back to things like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Sword & Sorcery* books, and the like, where deities directly interacted with characters who existed within their quasi-historical quasi-mythopoetic worlds – indeed, the names of the deities in some roguelike games are drawn directly from these kinds of ludic/textual sources. I see it more as a genre norm, and something that speaks to the genre’s history, than any kind of inherently necessary component of a good roguelike, although some games, primarily *Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup* (*DCSS*), have elevated the creation of pantheons of interesting distinctive gameplay-altering deities to new levels.

What relation do you see between religion and games?

That’s a really interesting question. Lots of scholars like Girard, Gadamer, Schechner, Turner, Levi-Strauss, etc, have written on the relationship between ritual and play, though I’m not quite sure where I stand at the moment in the debate about the similarities and differences. So many societies had games that were intended, in some way or another, to show the favour or displeasure of the gods (Maya, ancient Egypt, etc), that there is certainly some deeper connection between the experience of play and the experience of ritual, or the use of play as a means for bringing a perceived divine order and sense to the chaotic randomness of the world. I think Girard’s observation that there are few non-ritualized games in ancient societies due to the risk of resentment

and vengeance in cultures lacking the strictures of the “rule of law” is particularly fascinating, and work from authors like Mihai Spariosu seems to support this kind of theory that our common perspective on play as being trivial, frivolous, and outside the normal realms of human life, is actually a very modern perspective. Ancient peoples tended to take play far more seriously as an important, challenging, potentially ecstatic or violent part of life, instead of the softer, safer models of play we have today. I think this is a really fascinating sub-field, and something I’m working on at the moment for a paper about the portrayal of “deep play” (play where the outcomes will seriously affect someone’s “real life”) and “dark play” (non-consensual or unaware play) in contemporary games-focused cinema, which should be out before too long.

Is there anything we didn’t ask that you would like to talk about?

I think I’ve covered pretty much everything. In my academic and game design work I’m coming at questions of religions and games from two different angles – examining the relationships between rituals and play in a historical/theoretical context, and then creating new religions for the player to “play with” in the present day – but I think these are both equally rich directions, even if they don’t actually inform each other all that much. Roguelikes, although an aspect rarely talked about, are probably one of the most “religiously rich” genres of game, even though all the religions present are entirely fictional, and often quite bizarre (I remain particularly fond of Jiyva, the Slime God, in DCSS). Games are a hugely intriguing field for exploring beliefs and rituals and ways of life, whether seriously or tongue-in-cheek, and I think we’re still only touching the surface in this kind of work – though hopefully URR will go a long way to moving these ideas forward!

Thank you very much Mark, and best of luck for your present and future projects!

The interview was held by Tobias Knoll.

Biography

DR MARK R JOHNSON is a postdoctoral fellow in game studies in the Digital Creativity Hub at the University of York. His work variously explores deep and dark play, gaming cultures, professional gaming, participatory game design, card games, computer game history, and unpredictability and skill in gameplay. He is also an independent game developer, a leading figure in the global roguelike community, the co-host of the Roguelike Radio podcast, a former professional poker player, a multiple game world champion, and a freelance games writer for a number of online games publications.

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